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How to cite:

Pike, Jon (2019). Action theory and the value of sport. Journal of the Philosophy of Sport, 46(1) pp. 14–29.

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Action Theory and the Value of Sport

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Abstract

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I present a corrective to the formalist and conventionalist down-playing of physical actions in the understanding of the value of sport. I give a necessarily brief account of the Causal Theory of Action (CTA) and its implications for the normativity of actions. I show that the CTA has limitations, particularly in the case of failed or incomplete actions, and I show that failed or incomplete actions are constitutive of sport. This allows me to open up the space for another model, drawn from Aristotle, for failed or incomplete actions, conceived of as 'doables'. This avoids some of the problems of the CTA. I explain the importance of difficult but doable actions, at which athletes often fail, and suggest that this establishes *pro tanto* value. Finally, I claim that this account of the actions that are constitutive of sport deepens our understanding of the value of sport as a whole.

Keywords:

Action, doables, conventionalism, formalism, bodies, value

It is important that in philosophy one should not present human beings as observers standing outside the world. It lies in the nature of philosophical inquiry that this should be the temptation since in philosophy one is trying to survey the human situation from some more independent standpoint dividing that which is in some sense given in the nature of things from that which is contingent upon changeable human convention.
(Hampshire 1959: 67-8)

I

Stuart Hampshire's remonstration to avoid observer status whilst discriminating between nature and convention, is one that philosophers of sport would do well to take to heart. Both parts are important: we must rub our stomachs and pat our heads at the same time, both discriminating between nature and convention, as we understand ourselves as part of the world. What is vital here is Hampshire's insistence on 'the *human* situation,' not some abstract, species-insensitive 'view from nowhere.' In this paper, it is from the perspective of the specifically human situation that I want to take on and criticise conventionalist accounts of sport. Central to this cluster of accounts is the claim that sport involves unnecessary (rather than natural) obstacles, (Suits 2005) or a 'gratuitous logic', (Morgan 2006) rather than a logic built into human lives and bodies. At a different level, these theorists severally argue that sport rests on 'Deep Conventions' (Morgan 2012), and on another level again, that the view that there is nothing wrong with the use of performance enhancing drugs except the conventions that outlaw them. (Savulescu, Foddy, and Clayton 2004). What these views have in common is that sports are defined at a relatively high, thickly social, and contingent level. Sports are constructions, their mutability is emphasised, and their naturalistic properties are backgrounded, to the extent that such properties are considered at all.

These conventionalist accounts overplay their hand. As a corrective, and following proverbs, Adam Smith, and Lenin, it might be time to bend the stick back.[1] So here is a counterview. There are natural foundations for human sport and these foundations generate some normative content. Sports must 'cut nature at the joints.' Again, bending the stick, we *discover* what sports there are, when we discover what we can do with our bodies in the world. We *discover*, too, how they should be played: we don't (just) invent them. The value of sport lies in, or is at least derived from, difficult actions, not (just) rules, conventions, an *ethos*, or a legal system.

Compare two pictures of sport. The first is a quick and nasty caricature of formalism – not perhaps a majority view these days, but nonetheless clear and potent. Imagine a picture of different sports as essentially contentless sets of rule-governed activity, where the standard of evaluation is compliance with arbitrary and gratuitous constitutive rules that construct a sporting practice. This goes with a conception of the particular physical activity as underdetermined and normatively empty. On this account we could make a sport out of anything.

Having fixed this image in your head, go to any sport match as a spectator. What do you see? First, a group of people engaged in a series of *tryings*, exerting themselves to do difficult things. These tryings are manifested in this same group of people moving (their bodies) in different ways. Some, but not all effortful attempts culminate in successful intentional action. People playing sport try to do difficult things that are on the margins of their abilities, and sometimes they succeed but more often they fail. Watching a sports match, a contest, or a race, involves seeing a series of actions: persons moving their bodies, in specific, sometimes odd ways: hitting things, kicking things, throwing things and trying to catch them, pulling things, jumping, running and so on. Athletes characteristically try as hard as they can to do difficult things: they 'give 100%' - and still, very often, they do not manage to do what they are trying to do.

What we observe are actions rather than rules. When we go to a match we tend to watch the players, rather than bury our heads in the rule book. Hence, we might expect a lot of philosophical input from contemporary action theory into the philosophy of sport. But this turns out not to be true; an odd fact emerges when one surveys the literature: whilst all the philosophers of action use sporting examples, few philosophers of sport write about the philosophy of action.[2] But since the formalist picture does not – at least for me – spring to mind when I watch a sports event, perhaps it will be useful to follow the other, sweatier, and perhaps more difficult path.

I want to suggest that we follow this path to get to where the action is; in the philosophy of action and away from normative theories that start with supposedly 'constitutive' rules. One aim of this paper is to switch attention towards genuinely constitutive actions and away from the subsequent rules that regulate or frame them. So I look at some ideas in the philosophy of action, starting with the debate between Donald Davidson and Elisabeth Anscombe. This debate founded the modern sub-discipline of the philosophy of action, reinvigorating it from roots in Aristotle.

I proceed as follows. I give a necessarily brief account of the Causal Theory of Action (CTA) and its implications for the normativity of actions. I show that the CTA has limitations, particularly in the case of failed or incomplete actions, and I show that failed or incomplete actions are constitutive of sport. This allows me to open up the space for another model for failed or incomplete actions conceived as doables. Finally, I show that this account of the actions that are constitutive of sport deepens our understanding of the value of sporting actions.

II

To be brief and at the risk of oversimplification, the Davidson/Anscombe debate is the crux of a dispute over the explanation of human action between positivistic science and the tradition of 'empathic understanding' or *verstehen* found in Weber and others and pursued by Wittgenstein in the Philosophical Investigations (Wittgenstein 1953). The dispute, though it has much earlier roots, is to do with Wittgensteinian and neo-Wittgensteinian scepticism about 'scientism' and its reduction of explanations of human behaviour into simple causal stories.

The study of Anscombe's <u>Intention</u> has been revitalised in recent years,[3] and in an important contribution, Stoutland describes the different world views in an enlightening way. He argues that the Davidsonian view understands our fundamental relations to the world as causal:

> We know the world because it affects our senses and thus causes us to have various perceptual beliefs that constitute knowledge of the world if they are internally coherent. We know the objects and events in the world, not directly but through their causing beliefs in us that are about them. Our acting in the world is similarly indirect. We act when our beliefs and desires cause bodily movements that cause events outside our body. The movement of our fingers causes the switch to flip, which causes the light to go on, and so on. (Ford, Hornsby, and Stoutland 2011: 19-20)

Anscombe's world view is very different; less in keeping with the empiricist and scientific view, and more like both common sense, and the ancient Aristotelian account:

> The knowledge we gain through perceptual experience is of the world directly without the mediation of beliefs: the causal relations that underlie such experience enable it to be direct rather than constitute it as indirect.

Not only knowledge but also action is direct rather than mediated:

> To act is not to have one's bodily movements caused by one's beliefs and desires; it is to exercise the power to move one's body directly and intentionally. Further, to exercise that power is not primarily to *cause* events outside one's body; it is to perform actions that extend beyond one's body and its movements. Walking, running, eating, drinking, pounding, skiing,

> greeting, writing--ordinary bodily activities all--do not consist of bodily movements plus events they cause; they *are* our moving our bodies in ways that extend beyond them. We can run or walk only on a surface, that is, only in a world outside ourselves that also acts on us.... to ski is not to cause skis to move: those are extended bodily movements. All these bodily activities require that the bodily movements occur as constituents of a structured activity that is more than the sum of the movements. (Ford, Hornsby, and Stoutland 2011: 20)

The contrast reported here runs through the work of the two theorists: Davidson specifically says that 'action ends at the epidermis' and describes this as a very odd thought. Anscombe in turn, and in characteristically blunt manner, describes this a 'mad idea.'

Despite this, Davidson's account of actions as events (Davidson [1963] 2001) has become the standard view, which I will refer to as the Causal Theory of Action or CTA. Schlosser – a partisan of the causal theory - spells out why he considers it is so important here:

> "The event-causal framework [i.e. CTA] is by far the most widely accepted view in contemporary philosophy of mind and action. One reason for this is that the commitment to [this] framework is tantamount to a commitment to a very minimal and widely endorsed kind of naturalism, according to which any appeal to irreducible substance causation or teleology is to be avoided" (Schlosser 2015)

We can specify five features of the CTA. First, in explaining actions we are explaining events which are caused by a desire/belief couple. Second, the desire and its associated means-end belief constitute the primary reason for an action taken by an agent. These primary reasons are the causes of actions: they relate to actions in the same way as ordinary physical causal laws. Thirdly, according to Davidson intentions – whether reducible (early Davidson) or not (late Davidson) to desire/belief combinations, are *mental states*. Fourth**,** the CTA rejects teleological explanation – explanation in terms of the irreducible purposes of an agent.[4] Finally, and as a sort of summary of this, we might say that, according to the causal theory, there is a *de re* causal relation between an intention (conceived of as a mental state) and a concrete particular action.

Hursthouse sums this up by giving the following general view of the causalist thesis: "Intentional actions are actions or movements caused, perhaps in a certain way, by certain mental states or events, whose occurrence explains the occurrence of the action or movement." (Hursthouse 2000: 84)

III

I want to raise concerns about two problems associated with the CTA. The first problem arises from the consideration that actions happen over time; that they take time to complete. This draws our attention to the aspect[5] of action-sentences and the correspondence of these action-sentences to actions as events. Some properties of actions, and action-descriptions change as tenses change. And I will be concerned specifically with actions themselves, and with intentions-in-actions.

Davidson characteristically explains events in the past - 'Jones did it with a knife' - as in:

> Much of our talk of action suggests … that there are such *things* as actions, …'Jones did it with a knife.' 'Please tell me more about it.' The 'it' here doesn't refer to Jones or the knife, but to what Jones did—or so it seems. (Davidson [1967] 2001: 108-9)

So Davidson argues that there are such things as actions, and that actions are events. But many events take time to happen, like, to take the standard example, baking a cake.[6] Whilst one is baking a cake, there is no cake*.* Whilst one is jumping, there is no jump.[7] Baking a cake can fail to produce a cake. Intentional actions can be interrupted, change, fail to be completed, and the agent can change their mind etc. Then there is no 'action' *qua* event – no cake - but there is an intention-in-action.

If we were only concerned with concrete particular actions, action that have been completed, the CTA would not face this difficulty: 'Jones buttered the toast' seems amenable to causal explanation. Jones desired some buttered toast, and had a means-end belief involving knives, pats of butter and so on, and this desire/belief couple caused him to butter the toast. But, importantly, buttering the toast is, for most of us, easy and so we customarily complete the action. It is, as a result, easy to miss a point made by Aristotle: the difference between complete and incomplete actions. Aristotle argues this in Metaphysics 9.6 1048b

> For every movement is incomplete – slimming, learning, walking, building; these are motions and incomplete at that. For it is not the same thing which at the same time is walking and has walked or is building and has built or is becoming and has become or is being moved and has been moved. But what is being moved is different from what has been moved, and what is moving from what has moved…The latter sort of process then I call an actuality (ἐνεργειαν or *energeia)* and the former a change (κίνησιν or *kinesis)* [my translation JP] (Aristotle 1933)

So in cases of *energeia*, the causal theory might seem adequate, but in cases of *kinesis* it seems to have no purchase. Recall that the casual theory requires a *de re* relation between an intention, thought of as a mental state comprised of a desire and a means-end belief, and a concrete particular – an actuality (on my translation). But there can be no *de re* relation between an intention and a particular event, if there is no particular, and there is no particular until the action is complete, as in the case of *kinesis*. When there is an intention-in-action, there is no event, no actuality or *energeia* and when there is an event, there is no longer an intention-in-action. Another way to put this is that particular actions can be identified as events, after the fact, but not during the fact, when all we have to go on is intentions-in-action. The implications of this for the best account of sport are profound, and will be discussed below.[8]

The second problem is that no value for actions can be extracted from a causal account like the CTA. Causal accounts give us one damn thing after another: the whole basis of Anscombe's alternative is that we can mark off intentional actions by asking *why* they were carried out. For some theorists such as Schlosser, this non-normativity is the *point* of the CTA. Theorists who disagree about the cogency of the CTA agree about its non-normative status. For example, here is Hornsby on its distorting effects:

> When the standard story [viz. the CTA (JP)] is the baseline for questions in moral psychology, a shape is imposed on those questions that they should never have been allowed to take on. Meanwhile the orthodoxy in philosophy of mind is silently reinforced. (Hornsby 2010: 3)

Standing against this is Anscombe's account of intention, which opens up space for evaluation. In **Intention**, she claims: 'the agent must want to do the action because she characterises and conceives of it as a *form of the good.'* (Anscombe 1957) In fact, it has been effectively argued that Intention does not present a theory of action at all, but rather the presuppositions of a moral theory. (Wiseman 2016b)

One reason for this is the characterisation of practical reason, and in particular of 'wanting', in **Intention**. Anscombe insists that actions have a desirability characteristic – and the desirability characteristic provides a sort of 'bottoming out' of the explanation of an action. For our purpose, a fitting example comes from Aristotle: a practical syllogism concerning healthy food. Anscombe comments:

> Here the description 'digestible and wholesome' might seem not to be a pure desirability characterisation. But since wholesome means good for the health and health is by definition the good general state of the physical organism, the characterisation is adequate for a proper first premise and does not need to be eked out by say, 'health is a human good' (a tautology) (Anscombe 1957: 72)

The bottom line is a desirability characteristic. Amongst others, Jo Raz (Raz 1975) argues for this classical notion – which he attributes to Anscombe - of the attachment of the Good to reasons (Raz 1975): On this account Good is not a free-standing property separate from our actions; a view which leads to the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy'.[9] If what we do is done for reasons, and reasons aim at the Good, then we have a link from actions to the Good. If my actions aim at the Good, then it is better to hit it rather than miss it. On a little reflection, it should be clear both that this does not get us very far in establishing value in successful actions, and that for the purposes of this argument, we don't need to get very far.   It establishes only *pro tanto* value, not all-things-considered value.   But establishing *pro tanto* value is all that is needed: I do not argue here for the value of javelin throwing over aid work for the global poor, just for the value of throwing a javelin a long way, when that is what the javelin thrower is trying and able to do. What we need to establish is that *something can be said* for javelin throwing.

But how much can be said? How much is something? Davidson responds in a minimal but concessive way to this suggestion. He says:

> Corresponding to the belief and attitude of a primary reason for an action, we can always construct (with a little ingenuity) the premises of a syllogism from which it follows that the action has some (as Anscombe calls it) 'desirability characteristic' Thus there is a certain irreducible – *though somewhat anaemic* [italics JP] – sense in which every rationalization justifies: from the agent's point of view there was, when he acted, something to be said for the action (Davidson [1963] 2001)

Davidson draws our attention to the sense that, for an agent, there is something to be said for the action. There is a low-level sense that *obviously* agents justify their φ-ing by rationalising. Having reasons for thinking that the act is desirable makes that action *in some sense* good – i.e. justifies it. But this sense, says Davidson, is anaemic - an intriguing metaphor. An objection to my argument finding normativity in successful actions can be made, conceding that the argument may work, but the payoff is negligible.   A causal account might do the same. A Davidsonian can generate normativity in the same way: from 'I intend to φ' to 'I succeed in φ-ing' or 'I fail in φ-ing' comes the *anaemic* attainment of low-level normativity. [10]

To form a response to this objection, consider what might raise the normativity - put a shot of iron into the blood - here. This claim - that the sense in which every rationalisation justifies is anaemic - follows from the causal theorist's conception of action. There are at least two sources of anaemia: the smallness and the ease of the actions in question. One problem with the CTA is that it relates causal miniatures – events as instantaneous time slices and actions as immediately preceding causal mental states.

But suppose the actions are in some sense *big* and *difficult*? I'll take size first. Suppose we are interested in big actions – not events as instantaneous time slices but successfully hurling one's body over a bar, or successfully kicking a ball over a crossbar – just to take two notably basic actions that take place in particular sports (high jump and rugby). Neither of these is reducible to states of affairs at an instantaneous time slice – they are both movements through space and time. There is an obvious distinction between *kinesis* and *energeia*. They necessarily involve intentions-in-actions.   In comparison, switching a light switch is a model of near instantaneous action – it does not (normally) include settling oneself, visualising the successful action, pacing a carefully accelerating run up... then hitting the light switch. Turning on the light is not normally something we fail at, because it is a small, easy action. Of course, it can be broken down into its component parts, but these are not actions themselves that need to be practiced, separately, and then fitted together. The smallness of the action for normally competent adults makes the causal story more compelling for those actions. The sorts of cases cited by Davidson seem to mask some of the essential properties of difficult actions – that take place over time, and that we often fail at.

Philosophers of sport are – or at least ought to be - interested in big, physically difficult actions, the actions characteristically involved in sport. These are actions for which there is, for the agent, something more substantial to be said about success in their execution. Success cannot be taken for granted, just because these are difficult actions. Because they are difficult actions, the gap between intention and completed action is bigger, in time and often in space. When there is a gap between the precedent intention and the completed action, it is much easier to see that the content of an action cannot be reduced to a causal relation, simply because there is no completed concrete particular in existence, at this point.

Take, first, the example of a single athlete, attempting a one-off difficult action.

- Blanka Vlašić approached the bar with the intention of jumping over it. She cleared the bar. There was a successful jump.
- Blanka Vlašić approached the bar with the intention of jumping over it. She knocked the bar off. There was no successful jump.

Vlašić's intention-in-action is 'jumping over the bar'. The intended action is a 'jump over the bar'. As we have seen, in the unsuccessful case, there can be no *de re* causal connection between the intention in action and the concrete particular event – first, because there is *no* concrete particular event all the time that there is an intention in action, and second because in the unsuccessful case, there is no 'jump over the bar.' Vlašić is trying and failing to do something – the 'and failing' means that there is no jump over the bar – which is *exactly* the action that she intended all the time she was intending it.

That's to say there is a mismatch between the intention in action and the action itself. But first another example, this time involving a team of athletes.

- Knockaert[11] passed the ball to Groß. There was an event – the pass.
- Knockaert passed the ball to Groß but it was intercepted. What we are left with is intention-in-action and a pass - that was, however, not accomplished.

It may be true of Knockaert, in both cases, that he is passing the ball, though in the second case, he is not going to pass the ball (successfully), because it is intercepted. The passing of the ball is an intentional act, and he has immediate knowledge of what he is doing (passing the ball) but the accomplished pass is not an event.

Or try another standard case in the literature. Suppose I am knocked down by a bus whilst I am crossing the road. What was my action? Crossing the road. But I never got to the other side. As Thompson points out, Davidson's early work uses (entirely?) accomplishment verbs (Jon crossed the road) rather than activity verbs (Jon is crossing the road). Or to put it in the Aristotelian idiom, he gives an account of *energeia*, but not of *kinesis*.

Was I merely *trying* to cross the road? No. I was trying, but also *actually* crossing the road, when I got knocked down. (Compare the grammar of: the tree was falling over until it was stopped by the next tree. It didn't then complete the action of falling over. It did not fall over – and it was certainly not trying to fall over. (Anscombe 1957: 39).) Whilst an intention is an intention-in-action there is *no particular action* of the type describable as "my crossing the street", and when there is a particular action there is no longer this intention-in-action (c.f. McDowell (McDowell 2011))

IV

Philosophy of sport is essentially concerned with difficult actions, actions that often lead to failure. In the next part of my argument I aim to show that this kind of mismatch between the intention in action and the action itself is very common in – and constitutive of – sport.
In this section I will argue for what I will call the failure presumption:

> The Failure Presumption: athletes attempting the difficult physical actions in sport standardly, and essentially, tend to fail at those actions.

The tendency to fail is a *sine qua non* of sporting actions because sporting actions are difficult. Athletes can fail in a limited number of ways, among which are:

- ***Missing*** *what the athlete is trying to hit* (goals, targets, the space in front of team-mates, the head of the opponent, the court, the hole, one's target time)
- ***Hitting*** *what the athlete is trying to miss* (hurdles, slalom poles, course gates, the high jump bar, the net, the bunker, the rough)
- ***being thwarted by opponents*** (being tackled and losing possession, being blocked, intercepted, saved)
- *being **overtaken** or **caught** /failing to **overtake** or **catch***
- *going **too slowly/**going **too fast***
- ***dropping/not catching*** *the ball*
- ***falling over/off*** *(the bike, the beam, the rock face, the horse, the track)*

In all these cases the athlete has an intention-in-action, but they fail to complete the action under the description which they intend the action. These failing actions are the most common actions in sport; more common than successful actions. I will now argue for the Failure Presumption, and then illustrate how this is integral to sport.

There will be more failing actions than successful actions in all sports for the following reason: In a match with two teams, battling it out, the competition is a zero-sum game. One side wins, and the other side loses. But this is true at the micro level as much as at that macro level. One player gains or retains possession and the other player fails to gain or retain possession. One player tries to get the ball past his opponent, the other player tries to stop this. Strikers try to get the ball in the goal, and goalkeepers try to save the ball.

Now, since these are zero-sum contests, it might be thought that there will be an equal number of successful actions and failed actions. But then there will be several tests in a game that are uncontested, and my claim is that these will tend to be the occasions of failures as well. The reason for this is that difficulty is a feature of sporting actions. Most shots do not score goals; they miss, and when they do, goalkeepers do not succeed in saving the ball: there is a failure with no corresponding success. Compare the statistics for shots on target and shots off target at the end of a football match. Plausibly the shots on target have a zero-sum structure, but the shots off target are simple failures, with no corresponding success. Most runners fail to run faster than all the other competitors in a foot race, but not because they are successfully thwarted by a competitor. Unforced errors are a big part of sport, and for good reason. Hitting a ball over the net, hitting a ball into a hole, running very fast, and so on – all these things are *hard to do*, even on their own, without an opponent trying to beat you.

To illustrate the Failure Presumption, I turn to a common topic. We often look for the key, evaluatively-relevant differences between musical performances and competitive sport. Music examples crop up very often in the philosophy of sport, and they pose several difficulties for accounts of the value of sport that make it *sui generis*. For example, playing music seems to be an autotelic activity, pursued for its own sake, and thus a competitor to games in Suit's post-instrumental Utopia (Hurka and Tasioulas 2006). Like sport, music gives person's life a narrative structure, fulfilling the same functional role as sport in making our lives meaningful (Gleaves 2017). Again, but in a more applied context, a vexed question in discussions of anti-doping is whether there are morally relevant differences between the use of performance enhancing drugs such as beta blockers in music performances and in shooting events (Savulescu, Foddy, and Clayton 2004)

But there is at least one important and evaluatively-relevant difference between the two activities or practices. Consider the role and importance of mistakes or failures for a viewer of two different events. First, consider attending a concert, say Rosalyn Tureck, playing Bach's Goldberg Variations. This is, in parts, a very difficult piece, full of technical complexity. Now, I'm not so crass as to think that the only aesthetic property of a performance of the Goldberg Variations is merely the absence of wrong notes. Nonetheless, a performance with no wrong notes is perhaps a reasonable expectation on the part of the audience. A wrong note is an error, and we don't expect to hear errors at a performance by a maestro such as Tureck: technical accuracy is a presumption. More than that – there is a place for wrong notes and technical mistakes, but that is in practice, or rehearsal, and in the many years of training that a pianist must commit to eliminating mistakes. A performance is supposed to be an end of that process of practice and a place where the execution is supposed to be technically perfect.[12]

There is an important evaluatively-relevant differences with athletic performance. To bring it out, suppose, on the following night, after the Bach concert, you attend an athletics meeting, and take a seat on the top bend, next to the high jump competition. Again, you will see experts, who put in a great deal of practice, attempting something difficult. But under what conditions might you see a series of technically flawless actions, without any mistakes? It *would* be possible to attend a *soi-disant* high jump competition at which there were no obvious mistakes, but only by leaving the bar so low that every athlete clears it, and then concluding the competition. In contrast to the technically flawless Goldberg Variations, this would entirely miss the point of a high jump competition. In high jump, the task is made more and more difficult until all but one competitor can't do it anymore.[13] Now, high jump competition is the test to failure *par excellence,* but the point applies across the board. For every race won, there are competitors who lose, hence failing to achieve the purpose of their action - that of winning. And in every contest (as opposed to test) then there are errors and failures *from the beginning*: within seconds of the whistle at a soccer game, there will be a tackle that is won – and lost. With the first ball of a cricket match, the batter is either in or out, either successfully protecting his wicket or failing to do so. Equally and obversely, the bowler is either successful in their intention of bowling a ball that gets passed the batter and hits the stumps - or not. Attending a sports event where there were no failures (if this is indeed possible) would miss the whole point of the exercise. The opposite is true of visits to music concerts, or to a performance of a play.

It seems then that philosophers of sport need a vocabulary and a metaphysics that captures, repeatedly, the multiple possibilities of failure.[14] Arguably, this is an essential component of sport, with a corresponding essential virtue: resilience in the face of failure (for this see the important paper by John Russell (Russell 2015)) This is a vocabulary not just of *completed* actions but of possible actions and actions in process: actions that are 'coming-to-be' but are interrupted, or broken off. The CTA does not manage this, and so we need a different approach to action, albeit now a minority one, found in the work of Aristotle (especially the Metaphysics and the Physics) and the tradition that came after him. This tradition has a teleological rather than a causal account of action at its heart

(Ford 2018; Anscombe 1957: 51-2)V

The term Doable (Velleman 2014) – coined in recent debates in the philosophy of Action – means something that can be done; it captures the sense of a directly perceived possibility for action.[15] It is, of great help in thinking about the actions that constitute sport, because if we are to find value in difficult actions we need a proper account of those actions, and given the problems above, the CTA is no help. Instead we can aim to resolve these problems by thinking of actions as doables and with a Neo-Aristotelian alternative account of action and intention.

How does this help? First a doable can be tensed. Second, a doable is the object of a subject: it is what an agent attempts, and what they can succeed in doing. Third, a doable is not an instantaneous time slice, but something that can be individuated over time. This allows us to think of intentions in a

different way: we can think of intentions as prospective (I intend to do this doable) and their contents as progressive through the action: I am intending to do, that is, successfully to complete, this doable action that I am now doing. My intention looks forward to the completion of the doable and changes as I get closer to its completion. My intention becomes smaller in scope as I work my way through the doable and there is less to do and more that is done. What I have in mind here will be familiar to long distance runners, counting down the miles, or for anyone who lifts, counting down the reps. Doability; the property of being a doable is agent relative. Sporting actions are doable by skilled individuals, but difficult: accomplishing them is an achievement, and of value, for this reason. (see Suits (Suits 2005), Hurka (Hurka and Tasioulas 2006), and Bradford (Bradford 2015) on the value of difficulty)[16]

The term doable captures the possibility of successful and unsuccessful actions. and this allows us to find some normativity in the action. If we *aim* at something, then the metaphor helps us: it is *pro tanto* better if we hit our target than miss it.[17] If the action is not an event but a doable, then there is normativity embedded in a teleological account. It's plausible, too that conceiving of actions as doables gives us a short cut to the 'sweet tension' that Kretchmar (Kretchmar 1975) finds at the heart of sport. This works both for the spectator - 'She's trying to do a doable, will she succeed or fail? Let's watch' and for the participant - 'that looks difficult but doable: I wonder if I can manage it? Let's have a go.'

When we conceive of actions as doables that take time to complete, it becomes obvious that they take place at a *pace*: that is, the doing of a doable can be fast or slow – and successfully doing a doable can depend on whether we go too fast or too slow. It is a biophysical fact of the matter that attempting a doable might require the right speed – that crossing a ball to an onrushing striker can only be successful if it travels at the right speed, neither too fast, nor too slow. Normativity here derives from the biophysical facts of the matter. For example, take the goal scored by the Brazilian Ronaldinho by lobbing Seaman in the World Cup in 2002.[18] Ronaldinho perceived a doable that the other players on the pitch failed to perceive. In order to accomplish the doable, certain very specific physical parameters for his action were mandated. He had to kick the ball in exactly the right way, at exactly the right speed. This was difficult, and his success in meeting those parameters exemplified a capacity and a skill. It was a good goal.

It is, unsurprisingly, difficult to suck value out of causal chains: they are after all, one damn thing after another. But it is easy to see value in the realisation of an intention, thought of as the doing of a difficult doable. There is value in the successful performance of difficult actions. And this value, it seems to me, is the foundational value that we find in sport.

VI

My aim in this paper is to bring into focus a series of categories involved in sport that are prior to rules, conventions, and legal systems. Those categories are actions and activities, difficulty, and – what goes with and is deducible from difficult actions - success and failure, abilities and skills. I have argued that there are special features of action that are not amenable to being understood in the way suggested by the standard causal view. This is a *fortiori* true for the case of actions in sport, which are, by their nature, difficult. But these special features of action are, at the same time, what can make them *pro tanto* valuable.

Stuart Hampshire, in the opening quotation, asks philosophers to separate out the natural from the conventional, not as observers, but (he goes on to say) as embodied actors in the world. This is not easy: it asks us to question what we take for granted. It may seem so obvious that it is hardly worth mentioning, that we are constrained and embodied subjects for whom some actions are easy, others are difficult, and yet others impossible. This becomes clear not from a 'view from nowhere', some Cartesian Absolute Conception, but from the point of view of flesh-and-blood human beings. Some actions, some doables, are more doable than others. Ruling out infinite bodily transmogrification, as we should, this will always be the case, regardless of how we construct our institutions and practices.

What makes actions difficult, interesting, and valuable is often just a matter of how we *are* – the shape, size and powers of us *qua* humans and the shape, size and powers of the world in which we act and with which we interact.[19]

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[1] The reference is to Adam Smith (Smith 1993 [1776]: 882): "if the rod be bent too much one way, says the proverb, in order to make it straight you must bend it as much the other." . Lenin also approved of stick bending.